



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction
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*** GUEST EDITORIAL ***

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DPI 2009-16

Monday, February 9, 2009

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Investing in people: A state and national imperative

By Wisconsin State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

One hundred educators, policy makers, and business people provided valuable insights on the importance of investing in Wisconsin citizens during the Making Opportunity Affordable strategic planning event in late January.

They share an urgency to make education at all levels more productive and to ensure that our educational policies and practices help students progress from high school to postsecondary education. The days of family-supporting jobs that require no education or training beyond basic skills are gone. We must graduate more students from our high schools, technical colleges, and universities. The goal is straightforward. Wisconsin needs to make education beyond high school accessible, affordable, and successful for all students.

Currently, Wisconsin lags the national average in the percentage of residents who hold an associates or higher degree. In Canada, our neighbor to the north, 55 percent of adults hold a degree beyond high school; just 34 percent do in Wisconsin. The United States has dropped from first in educational attainment to 10th among industrialized nations. Improving educational outcomes is more than a state problem; it is a national imperative.

The Department of Public Instruction is a partner with the University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Technical College systems and the state's private colleges and universities. Together, we are focusing on four areas important to increased educational aspirations and attainment. High school preparation, postsecondary access, transitions and transfers, and certificate and degree completion are foundational to our goal of increasing the percentage of our population that holds a degree. To succeed, we must address the needs of our diverse student population. One size will never fit all.

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The Wisconsin High School Task Force identified high school experiences that engage students in rigorous and relevant learning that will prepare them for postsecondary study and workforce success. We are working to individualize and personalize high school. We are revising the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards in English language arts and mathematics to ensure students acquire deeper understanding and know how to apply 21st century knowledge and skills. We also are working with our higher education partners so students know what is required not just to exit high school but for next steps that may include enrolling in college credit-bearing coursework. We must support broad options for student success.

In addition to preparing more students to be in the pipeline for postsecondary study, participants in the Making Opportunity Affordable event identified key issue Wisconsin must address:

Aspirations and perceptions: We must acknowledge that technical college programs and four-year degrees are equally valuable career preparation. Regional economic development councils must work with high schools and postsecondary institutions to ensure that educational and workforce needs are aligned.

Financing: Many parents need mentoring on how to obtain financial aid for their children. More private funding from the philanthropic sector must be sought to support educational costs and financial aid needs. On-time graduation must be a priority.

Transportability: Credit for high school classes, prior experience, and postsecondary coursework must be articulated across systems with a simple process to evaluate and transfer collegiate credits. Curricular requirements within the postsecondary system must align between associate degree and bachelor degree programs.

Access and completion: Concurrent enrollment, easy transferability, and online classes can greatly expand access to college-level coursework. Wisconsin needs a consistent system for assessing prior learning to award credit for demonstrated skills developed outside the classroom.

Education is a series of milestones on the road of lifelong learning. Wisconsin must focus attention on smoothing the path from high school to postsecondary study and career success. We must invest in our citizens.

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Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction. In that position, she serves on the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents and the Wisconsin Technical College System Board. Making Opportunities Affordable is a project to examine whether educational policies and practices are helping or hurting student progress from high school to a postsecondary education.

NOTES: A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction “Media Contacts and Resources” webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/vm-media.html>. This editorial is available electronically at http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpi2009_16.pdf.